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ABSTRACT

Models of and research into the writing process support the use of peer editing in the regular activities of a writing class. It has the advantages of: adding perspective to students' perception of the writing process, both their own and others'; promoting student self-confidence; improving the class atmosphere by active student involvement; and providing an additional diagnostic and teaching tool. For teachers using peer editing, it is useful to establish a classroom climate of trust, design activities leading to the first editing exercise, give the students clear reasons for using the process, designate regular peer editing days, have specific tasks and questions for peer editors to use to build on previous work in class and on previous editing sessions, work with groups of three students, set a time limit for student editors, have student editors explain comments to their peers as well as write them down, have students rewrite their compositions and incorporate the suggestions made, and include an editor self-evaluation component. Common questions about peer editing in English as a second language (ESL) concern its effectiveness for grammatical errors, reinforcement of errors by peers, whether or not students take peer editing seriously enough, the opportunity for cheating and plagiarism, and the time consumed in the process. Editing sheets for intermediate and advanced ESL classes are appended. (MSE)

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THE HOW AND WHY OF PEER EDITING IN THE ESL WRITING CLASS

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Models of and research into the composing process support the incorporation of peer editing into the regular activities of writing classes. Procedural guidelines for using peer editing in ESL writing classes are presented and explained. Then frequently heard criticisms are addressed.

In the past decade changes have begun to be made in the way composition is taught to native speakers of English and to ESL students. Previously, emphasis was placed on writing organized, grammatically correct papers for English class; thus emphasis was on the finished product. Now the focus is on the process of writing. Models of the writing process point out the importance of revision as an integral part of this process (Murray 1980, Perl 1980, Flower and Hayes 1981). One way to help students focus on revision and writing as a process is through peer editing. Peer editing (sometimes termed peer critique or peer review) is defined here as students' reading and commenting on classmates' papers. This paper discusses the advantages of peer editing, outlines guidelines for in-class editing, and addresses common questions asked about peer editing in the ESL writing class.

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ADVANTAGES OF PEER EDITING

Peer editing does not miraculously change students into good writers but it has several advantages: it alters the students' perception of the writing process and of their own writing; it increases students' self-confidence and fosters personal growth; it unifies the class; and it serves as a teaching and diagnostic tool for instructors.

First, peer editing alters the students' perception of the writing process in general and of their own writing in particular. Students are frequently told effective writing is for a specific audience and a specific purpose. However, students often fail to comprehend the importance of these two aspects of writing. Students often write papers to please the instructor, a limited audience, and to get them a good grade, a limited purpose. Of course, in most classes neither grading nor this common attitude among students can be eliminated. Yet peer editing can reduce this prevalent attitude and help students realize they must consider audience and purpose. In peer editing, students are given a defined audience, their peers. Since they usually want to communicate with this real audience, students feel more of a commitment to their writing and are, thus, more motivated. Moffett (1968) stated that the majority of communication problems are caused by egocentricity; the writer assumes people think like and feel as he/she does. Flower (1979) labels this egocentric written work "writer-based prose" and labels the more effective written work which considers the audience "reader-based prose." Student writers tend to think they have expressed their ideas clearly, logically and effectively, and through peer editing, students learn if they have indeed done this. In addition to learning if they have communicated effectively and have written reader-based prose, they learn if their peers agree with their ideas and if they perceive reality as they do. Students are generally honest with each other and trust each other. Therefore, feedback from editors is taken seriously and considered carefully.

When students read their peers' papers, they see the commonality of writing problems. Students get a feeling for how they write compared to others and learn from their own and others'strengths and weaknesses. Reading others' papers, students begin to see possibilities, see what works and what does not work and see what they like and do not like. Peer editing reinforces the fact that writing is a complex process in which a writer must make numerous decisions.

Second, as students gain insights into writing in general and their own writing in particular, they develop self-confidence and grow as individuals. Students begin to experiment as they write and take more risks. With this experimentation, they often develop an individual voice and tone. Students also see themselves in a new role, as a decision maker and evaluator. Since

they may be asked to justify their choices, peer editing requires students to have reasons for their decisions and evaluations. This requirement makes students consider their options as editors more carefully. Students begin to understand that no rigid formula for good papers exists but rather that writing allows much freedom and individual choice.

Third, the atmosphere of a class is improved when peer editing becomes an integral component. The class works as a unit because students see themselves as actively involved in the aim of the class: helping each student improve his/her writing skills. Working closely in groups, students learn to respect and cooperate with each other as well as gain cultural awareness and knowledge.

Lastly, instructors can use peer editing as a diagnostic tool and a teaching tool. Instructors can better understand the strengths and weaknesses of the editor as a writer from his/her editorial comments. For example, if an editor writes, "The paper has a clear thesis and enough details" when in fact the paper has neither, then he/she probably does not understand these two concepts. Also, as explained in the guidelines below, the editing questions and tasks can focus on particular problems and emphasize essential elements of good writing. Instructors can gain insights into students' cognitive skills as well as grammatical skills through their editorial comments.

PROCEDURAL GUIDELINES

1. Establish a climate of trust and lay the groundwork for peer editing. It is important that classroom activities lead up to the first editing exercise. This foundation should be laid early in the semester and can be done in numerous ways. For example, do several small group (three or four people) exercises the first week: a group brainstorming session, a collaborative story, etc. Later give all the students a copy of an anonymous composition from a previous semester. After the students have had time to read it carefully, discuss the paper's strengths and weaknesses and edit the paper by answering specific questions devised by the teacher. If possible, show the paper on an overhead projector while doing this activity.

2. Have a reason for peer editing which is explained and evident to the students. This guideline is closely linked to the first one and is equally essential. The success of peer editing during the semester largely depends on the way it is presented to and perceived by the students. Since most students are eager to improve their writing skills, they will gladly participate in and concentrate on activities they believe will help them toward this goal. Point out that professional

writers find writing difficult and time consuming. Also point out that professional writers revise extensively and employ editors. Published writers, ideally non-native English speakers who have published in English as well as native English speakers, can be persuaded to speak to a class on how they write and publish their books. Such lectures and discussions are generally a real eye opener for the students. Stress that peer editing is always an intermediate step in the composing process; therefore, it provides useful information for writers. Editors are helpers, objective readers wanting to offer comments and to make suggestions that will assist authors in revising their papers and in communicating effectively. Assure students that writers have complete autonomy over their papers and can take or ignore editors' advice. However, authors should be able to justify all their decisions.

3. Designate peer editing days. By doing this the teacher is saying, "Editing is an essential part of the writing process, and peer editing is a way to help you become better self-monitors." Also, students appreciate routine and will progress more steadily with one.

4. Have specific tasks and questions for peer editors. (See appendix for sample editing sheets.) Experienced writers know what to look for in a paper and can analyze its weaknesses and strengths; most ESL students cannot. If students are asked to read and comment on classmates' papers without any guidance, the remarks are often vague and of limited usefulness to the authors. Typical comments are as follows: "The subject is interesting." "I like the paper." "I think there are many grammatical errors." Student editors do not know where to begin or what to say. They feel overwhelmed by the editing procedure. By asking a few specific questions, teachers give students concrete, manageable tasks. Also carefully written questions can provide authors with useful information for revising their papers. By reading and answering these questions, students are guided in evaluating a paper and learn what to look for. As students become better editors they gain self-confidence and begin to trust their evaluation of their own and their peers' papers. Tasks and questions can be designed for particular students and their individual and collective problems. For example, intermediate ESL students may be asked to identify the focus and supporting details, while advanced students may be asked to analyze tone, style or emphasis. If the teacher desires, grammatical questions may be included. Intermediate students may be asked to circle main subjects and verbs and to identify any errors in subject-verb agreement. Advanced students may be asked to identify sentences with subordinate clauses and analyze the emphasis of these sentences in relation to the focus of the paper. Teachers decide what questions and tasks are most useful and appropriate for their students. Every aspect of good writing cannot be covered in an editing session.

If an attempt is made to cover even most points, students will probably be confused and overwhelmed. Therefore, zero in on a few specific problem areas. As students become proficient in certain areas, introduce new editing tasks and questions.

In their research, Sommers (1980) and Beach (1976) found that experienced writers see a draft as a whole work and not as separate parts. ESL students generally do not do this, and, in fact, they are prone to worry about their grammar almost exclusively. Therefore, instructors should assist students in seeing beyond each sentence and assist them in communicating and in discovering the meaning of their writing. One way to provide this assistance is through peer editing questions and tasks. The following questions require students to see the composition as a unit:

(1) What is the focus of the paper? Is this focus clear throughout the paper? If not, where is the focus unclear?

(2) Is any information in the paper irrelevant? What information is irrelevant?

As the semester continues, students as editors and as writers begin to automatically ask themselves certain basic questions such as those above.

Two types of questions should always be included on the edit sheets. First, ask at least one question that points out the positive aspects of a paper; for example, "What do you think is the best thing about this paper?" Second, provide a space for general comments and suggestions, so student editors can go beyond the given questions and tasks if they want to. In such a space one of my advanced ESL student editors expressed my sentiments about his peer's paper succinctly when he wrote, "You have very good, relevant details and have a well-organized paper. The problem is that your thesis is dull. Can you change it?"

5. Tasks and questions should build on previous work in class and on previous editing sessions. This in conjunction with guideline #4 can reduce student frustration and confusion while increasing learning. Student editors must share a common vocabulary and knowledge. In order to answer editing questions, students must understand them. ESL students cannot be expected to identify the focus and details of a composition if these terms are unfamiliar to them. A good way to preview terms and questions is by using a sample student composition for group editing. After doing this group editing, students will be able to answer editing questions more accurately and in more detail. Previewing concepts and terms should actively involve students and contain as little lecturing as possible.

6. Several logistic guidelines are important. First, place students in groups of three with each student being responsible for reading and completing an edit sheet for his/her two peers' papers. Second, give student editors a time limit. Lastly, have students tell their comments and suggestions to their peers as well as write them.

By following this first logistic guideline, teachers can insure that each group has at least one student who is a fairly good editor. Each group should have students of different language backgrounds whenever possible. For example, a group could have an Arabic speaker, a Japanese speaker, and a Spanish speaker. Group members should complement each other by having different strengths and weaknesses. For example, perhaps one student has excellent ideas but has trouble organizing them while another group member organizes well, yet has insipid content. Grammatical and mechanical strengths and weaknesses may be considered also. Toward the end of the semester, students may be allowed to choose their own groups.

Having a time limit pushes student editors to work efficiently and insures that each person has his/her paper read twice and receives two edit sheets. Teachers should carefully consider this time limit when preparing the edit sheets. The amount of time allotted for editing depends on the length and nature of the writing assignment and the content of the edit sheet. Calculate how long the average student will take and allot that amount of time plus a few minutes. For a 500 word composition, editors are generally given 20 minutes to read and edit the first paper. At the end of the 20 minutes, students are told to exchange papers and begin on the second paper. Some students at first will not complete all the questions, but as the semester progresses they will become more proficient and work faster. If students finish early, look at the edit sheets and the corresponding paper. Generally areas for review and further consideration can be pointed out. With time these students typically become more detailed in their comments and use the allotted time more fully. During the editing, teachers can assist students who have questions or comments and can direct students who are having problems.

After the twenty minutes for editing the second paper, students are given ten minutes to discuss each group member's paper. This gives authors an opportunity to answer any questions, to justify their content, organization, style, etc., and to ask the editors to clarify their comments and suggestions. Following this guideline both authors and editors are forced to justify their papers and their comments on peers' work. By discussing and arguing about papers, students learn that there is no one right answer in writing but simply choices, some choices better than others but ones that writers ultimately make themselves.

7. Have students rewrite their compositions incorporating what they have learned through the peer editing session. Again, decide how best to improve them. They can incorporate their peers' suggestions completely, partially, or ignore them. However, they should be required to justify their decisions. In the majority of cases the rewritten papers are better than the drafts if for no other reason than the authors have spent more time thinking about, talking about, and working on their papers.

8. Add a self-evaluation component to the peer editing session. As students become familiar with the editing process, have students use an edit sheet to evaluate their own papers before the peer editing session. Then during the discussion at the end the writer and editors can compare their answers and perceptions. Adding this self-evaluation brings students closer to being good self-monitors.

COMMON QUESTIONS ABOUT PEER EDITING IN ESL CLASSES

1. How does peer editing deal with students' grammatical errors? Editors do not and cannot point out all grammatical errors in papers. Pedagogically, it does not seem sound to have all grammatical errors marked. However, one or two questions about grammar may be on the edit sheet. Students should be encouraged to view the paper as a unit that communicates their ideas. After students discover what they want to say, they should look closely at their sentences, word choice, etc. Instructors can read students' drafts and point out the major grammatical problems to be corrected in the next draft. Even on final drafts students' attention can be drawn to major grammatical errors and students can be encouraged to rewrite the paper. Emphasize that a paper is never exactly right and is never really finished. Encourage students to rewrite their papers as many times as they want.

2. Don't students reinforce each other's errors? By placing students in groups of three, instructors can reduce the likelihood of this happening. Group members should have different strengths and weaknesses and, thereby, learn from and help each other.

3. Do students take peer editing seriously? The majority of students do if the instructor believes in the process and "sells" it. (See the first three guidelines.) In fact, some students procure a personal peer editor, often a native English speaker, to read their drafts out of class.

4. Will student editors be honest and not simply praise the papers? Emphasize that editors are objective helpers who are supportive of their peers. This idea of support groups is

familiar to most cultures and most students are genuinely interested in helping their peers and are, thus, honest. The following excerpts from edit sheets illustrate this point:

(1) "Some ideas are very good but I'm afraid the second paragraph is copied from a book. You must rewrite it in your own words."

(2) "You should read about this subject more because your information is incorrect."

As students begin to feel more secure editing, their comments become more specific and helpful. After looking at the edit sheets with the corresponding draft, instructors can indicate which comments should be looked at carefully by writing "I agree" or "I disagree" by them.

5. Does peer editing encourage cheating and plagiarism? Editors do not write or even edit, in the publishing world sense, but rather they comment on the paper and suggest possible improvements. This should be made clear to writers and editors alike. Having worked with individuals and discussed their writing, instructors can identify plagiarism. Students must make their own writing decisions and write their own papers.

6. Peer editing is very time consuming. Is it worth all that time? Yes, it is. The advantages and pedagogical considerations have been outlined. However, in summary, students learn from editing others' papers and from having their papers edited. Students who become good editors generally become good writers. Editors begin to look at their own papers differently and more carefully. After a time, peer editing can contain a self evaluation component also. Improving writing skills is a slow process, and so the results of peer editing may not be evident in the first weeks and may seem minimal later. Yet, if we, as writing instructors, can help students understand how to write, understand the process and the place of revision in that process, and can help students be less dependent on us, then perhaps the students will continue to improve their writing and cognitive skills after they leave our classes. That, I believe, should be our goal!

APPENDIX

Assignment:_____ Author:_____

Date:_____ Editor:_____

(Intermediate ESL Class)

EDIT SHEET

Instructions: Your comments will be used by the author to rewrite his/her paper. Be as detailed and helpful as possible. Write all comments on this sheet. Only write on the paper when asked to. (Each editor of a paper should use a different colored pen or pencil on the author's paper.)

1. What is being described? What is the focus/point of this description?

2. Do all the details support this focus? Put an asterisk (*) by any details that do not belong.

3. Would you add more details? Put an "A" where you would add details.

4. What are the best aspects of this paper? What do you think is especially well-done?

5. Look at each sentence carefully. Are there any errors in subject-verb agreement? If so, put a #5 in the margin by these sentences.

6. General comments and suggestions:

APPENDIX

Assignment:_____ Author:_____

Date:_____ Editor:_____

(Advanced ESL Class)

EDIT SHEET

Instructions: This edit sheet will be used by the author in revising his/her paper. Be as detailed and helpful as possible. Write all comments on this sheet. Only write on the paper when asked to. (Each editor of a paper should use a different colored pen or pencil on the author's paper.)

1. What is the focus of the paper? Is the focus clear throughout the paper? Put an asterisk (*) by any part which does not relate to the focus.

2. Did the opening/introduction interest you? Why or why not? Give one suggestion for improvement.

3. Find three words, phrases or sections that you feel are especially well-written and effective. Put an "E" in the margin by them.

4. Find at least two places in which ideas have been linked (coherence markers). Were these ideas linked by (a) pronouns (b) transition words or phrases (c) repetition of words or phrases (d) parallel structures (e) other? Underline these and mark (a), (b), (c), (d), or (e) above them. Make one suggestion on how the coherence of the paper could be improved.

5. General comments and suggestions:

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